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SUBJECT: YES WE WANT ELECTIONS - BUT ON OUR OWN TIMETABLE

Classified By: POL/ECON CHIEF SHANNON CAZEAU FOR REASON 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. In the wake of the January/February strikes, Guinea,s political situation is complex and dynamic. Slow progress on elections preparations is partly due to lack of political will, but also due to intense scrutiny by Guinean citizens who are committed to ensuring that the elections are free, fair and transparent. While timely elections remain critically important, it is equally important that the underlying electoral process be allowed the time necessary to develop naturally. Guinea has held many elections, but has never had a true electoral process. While there are some political elements that are likely intentionally stalling elections, many Guineans do want them to move forward. At the same time, they are in no hurry to do so because they want to be sure they take the time to develop the process and ensure transparent results - for the first time in Guinea's history. The USG can play a pivotal role in developing this process while at the same time helping focus attention on the need for a realistic timeline.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) The entire text of this cable serves as commentary and Embassy analysis of Guinea,s current political situation with respect to delayed legislative elections, which is based on information and perceptions gathered from extensive contacts.

¶3. (SBU) In recent months there has been much discussion and debate, both internally and within the international observer community, regarding Guinea,s postponed legislative elections. Continued delays on the part of the Government of Guinea (GoG) are widely seen as deliberate stall tactics and evidence of a lack of political will throughout the government. However, political parties, although moving slowly on elections preparations, generally seem to want them to happen as soon as possible. Civil society organizations, including Guinea,s unions, underscore the importance of transparent elections, but some elements are pushing to revise the electoral code first. At the individual citizen level, many people seem to be ambivalent about elections and more focused on poor economic conditions. However, some of these conditions have improved in recent months under Kouyate's leadership (septel) and as economic hardship lessens, people are likely to take a stronger interest in advancing elections.

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY NOT SURE WHAT TO DO

¶4. (C) Frustrated by Kouyate's lack of progress on key objectives of the January 27 Accords and what seems to be a political stalemate between President Conte and Prime Minister Kouyate, some members of the international donor

community may be increasingly unwilling to engage the GoG on elections. During a G8 meeting the week of October 29 attended by Ambassador Carter, member countries were generally noncommittal. They seemed to feel that since the GoG lacks political will, it would be futile for the international community to continue to push for elections until there is a strict timetable in place and greater demand for elections on the part of civil society. However, the European Union, which already has well over \$5.5 million allocated to assist with elections preparations, is under substantial pressure from its members to push the process forward and ensure that money is spent appropriately. In addition, the UN representative is also committed to moving things forward.

POLITICAL CONTEXT HAS CHANGED...

¶5. (C) Most Guineans seem to believe that these legislative elections will be the most important elections in the Republic's history, at least until the presidential elections in 2010. For that reason, no-one is eager to rush the process. Contacts widely report that Guinea's fundamental political mentality has changed. Many hoped that Prime Minister Kouyate would embody this changed mentality and be able to reform the government. While Kouyate has had some successes, he has been unable to effectively implement his core mandate (see septel). For many Guineans, the January/February strikes signaled that the population holds the power to affect political change and is no longer willing to patiently tolerate ineffective political leaders and bad governance. In some ways, this created a political situation wherein the population may believe things have changed, but the system has been slow to catch up. The legislative

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elections is one of the first tests of the new system, which makes it critical that they be successful.

BUT THE SYSTEM HAS NOT

¶6. (C) At the same time, the elections are moving forward in a bureaucratic environment that remains essentially unchanged. All of a sudden, the opposition political parties realize that they will actually have to campaign for votes and that they might be able to win some power, while the ruling party is beginning to sense their possible demise. Everyone is scrambling to position themselves. However, none of the parties have any experience participating in transparent elections and are ill-prepared to carry out a credible election campaign with clear party platforms and reform agendas. In some ways, opposition participation in previous elections was more of a political statement than a targeted effort to win elections since the anticipated results were essentially pre-determined. For the opposition, the current situation is akin to being the token rabble rouser in the back of the room who is suddenly handed the microphone and does not know what to say or how to behave.

¶7. (SBU) Numerous meetings with civil society contacts and others indicate that voters lack confidence in the current electoral system. Guinea has only participated in flawed elections where votes were reportedly bought or influenced by external players. During the last presidential election, the opposition Union Force Democrat Guinean (UFDG) allegedly told voters not to vote because if they did so, they would be registered to pay income taxes. Contacts say memories such as these are still fresh, which act as a tangible deterrent. In addition, people are reportedly skeptical of the GoG's ability to hold credible elections given the fact that most of the government administrators managing elections belong to the old regime. Contacts also report that many voters feel that the political parties do not really represent the

population and therefore, any election would simply perpetuate the problems of the past even if new faces are put into office.

¶8. (SBU) According to Guinean law, only members of political parties can run for election. For the legislative elections, the majority of National Assembly deputies are elected by a national list. There are 38 deputies who are elected to represent a specific district. The remaining 76 deputies are drawn from the national lists according to percentages won by each party. For example, when voting, a voter will submit a vote for his local representative and then a vote for a party from the national list. In effect, voters are voting for parties and not for specific candidates since the parties decide how to rank order their candidates. This creates a system, wherein traditionally, the party members who contribute the most money to the party are the ones that usually end up at the top of the party lists.

¶9. (SBU) It is also important to recognize that the bureaucratic machine that ran elections in the past is still very much in place and likely to be the same machine that runs these legislative elections, which makes voters and political parties alike skeptical. Many contacts have emphasized the importance of administrative neutrality, on the part of the government, pointing to the need to replace long-time ruling Party for Unity and Progress (PUP) supporters throughout the government, its extensive administrative bureaucracy before elections in order to create the best possible environment for transparency. However, while there are some appointed positions that can be replaced, the 8,000 plus government officials who will be responsible for overseeing the individual polling stations are elected officials (at the local level) and cannot be replaced by appointment.

WHY NOT JUST CHANGE THE ELECTORAL CODE?

¶10. (C) Worried about the above mentioned problems with Guinea's electoral system, some members of civil society and the unions are talking about trying to amend the electoral code before the elections. Their priority is to allow independent candidates to run for election, which would enable their own group to participate, but they also propose other changes such as defining minimum qualifications for potential candidates. However, any efforts to change the electoral code within the current political environment would likely delay elections for months (if not longer) and are unlikely to succeed. The current National Assembly seems to

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be content to sit where they are and in no hurry to move elections forward. Debating over legislation to change the electoral code would give them the perfect opportunity to extend their terms indefinitely. While some elements are pushing for electoral change, other civil society leaders are advocating for elections first and electoral reform second.

LOOKING TO POSSIBLE ELECTIONS RESULTS

¶11. (C) Guinea's new political environment has created a situation where people do not really know what is going to happen. Without any experience with credible elections, no one is sure what kind of support any one party has, although most are convinced that no one party can currently win a clear majority in the National Assembly. As a result, parties are scrambling to form alliances and build up as much of a support base as possible. Currently, three blocs appear to be emerging as likely main contenders: the Rally for the Guinean People (RPG) party and its minor allies; an alliance of the Union Force Republican (UFR), Union Forces Democratic Guinean (UFDG), and the Union for Progress and Renewal (UPR)

opposition parties; and the ruling PUP. This set-up illustrates Guinea,s changing political environment. The RPG, for example, has traditionally been seen as a radical opposition party and largely discounted as a major political player. However, it seems to be shaping up as a solid contender as evidenced by poloff discussions with other opposition party representatives who feel that they need to form an alliance in order to ensure a win over the RPG and the PUP.

¶12. (C) If the elections do end up playing out along these three blocs, this could set the stage for political divisions along ethnic lines. The RPG and its allies represent the Malinke ethnic group while the other potential opposition alliance represents the Peuhls and Forest tribes. The Soussou, the third largest ethnic group (also President Conte,s ethnic group), seem to be spread between the emerging political blocs although a number of them may end up aligning with Conte,s PUP. At this point, it is not clear what role ethnicity could play in the upcoming elections, but it is a question the Embassy is exploring.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY WILL FIX IT

¶13. (C) A number of contacts have repeatedly said that they need help from the international community to ensure transparency. However it seems like rather than taking responsibility for Guinea,s role in its own elections, some contacts are looking for outsiders to make sure the elections are a success. Few are eager to step up to the plate and take responsibility for the process. On a fundamental level, many Guineans do not seem to believe that they can successfully hold transparent elections because the challenges before them are insurmountable.

KEY CHALLENGES

¶14. (C) In light of the above discussion and other recent Embassy reporting, there are several key challenges that must be addressed in order to achieve transparent legislative elections:

- lack of voter confidence
- lack of voter preparedness
- need for government neutrality
- unrealistic reliance on international community
- lack of political will on part of government
- demands to revise electoral code
- ambivalence on part of international community
- unrealistic expectations
- possibility of ethnic divisions

CREDIBLE ELECTIONS ON A GUINEAN TIMETABLE

¶15. (C) While there are many challenges ahead and political will is lacking, credible legislative elections remain critically important for a number of reasons. The population is counting on fundamental political change and it does not seem to be happening within the current power structure (see septel). The National Assembly is ineffective and unlikely to serve any credible role until elections are held. But perhaps most important is the fact that these elections will

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likely serve as a litmus test for the entire country. All eyes are focused on the presidential elections in 2010 as the real opportunity for political change. Successful legislative elections would help set the stage for presidential elections and instill confidence in Guinea,s developing democratic system.

¶16. (C) These elections are a history-making opportunity for Guinea to prove to itself and other countries that it can successfully elect its leaders in a democratic, transparent way. Perhaps no-one is more aware of that than Guineans themselves. Although progress has been slow, people want change and they seem to want democracy, but they need to develop it on their own terms, according to their own timeline. Guinea has had elections before, but it has never had a true electoral process. The country is generally starting from scratch.

¶17. (SBU) The USG can play a pivotal role in this process by providing international leadership, guidance, technical assistance, and patience tempered with caution. Embassy is in the process of considering the above political context as we review USG strategies and look to define the best method for moving forward on elections and encouraging Guinea's nascent democracy. Embassy appreciates recent funding approval of \$500,000 for elections programs, which will greatly enhance USG efforts in Guinea.
CARTER